

# Celebrating the ‘good life’ in Aristophanes’ *Peace*

Naomi Scott

War and peace loomed large in the fifth-century Athenian imagination. Naomi Scott investigates how they were treated in comedy, at a time when it seemed as if peace had finally arrived.

The year 421 B.C. marked a turning point in the political situation in Athens. The Peace of Nicias in the spring of that year seemed to bring an end to the war with Sparta within reach. Just a few days earlier, Aristophanes staged *Peace*, his first ‘post-war’ play. The play concerns the exploits of a peasant farmer, named Trygaeus. Fed up with the war between Athens and Sparta, Trygaeus hatches a plan. Taking his cue from the hero Bellerophon, who flew up to the heavens on his winged horse Pegasus, Trygaeus raises up a giant dung beetle and flies up to Olympus to confront the gods. Upon arrival, he discovers that Zeus has buried the goddess Peace in a deep pit, thus condemning the Greeks to endless conflict. With the help of a chorus of farmers, Trygaeus rescues the goddess, and the second half of the play sees him enjoy the benefits of peace and prosperity which he has earned for himself, and for the whole of Greece.

The play is not perhaps a favourite of modern critics: while Trygaeus’ flight aboard his giant dung beetle is an undeniably brilliant set-piece, once our hero returns from Olympus with the goddess Peace in tow, the play seems rather to lose momentum. Certainly, there are some good jokes during Trygaeus’ encounter with the arms-makers who now find themselves without a market for their products, but even these fall a little flat without the spectacle which accompanied the scenes on Olympus. Despite the lack of energy in the post-Olympus section of the play, I think that the celebration of the ‘good life’ in the second half of *Peace* should not be overlooked. In particular, I would like to suggest that it takes on greater significance when read in light of the play’s parody of Euripides’ tragedy, *Bellerophon*; and that the *Peace*’s contrast, between the tragic misery of the *Bellerophon* and its own atmosphere of celebration, helps to assert the greater importance of comedy for a city which, in 421, seemed set to enjoy a period of peace

and prosperity.

## Comedy ‘vs’ tragedy – *Peace* and *Bellerophon*

But first, let us return to the celebrated dung beetle. In addition to being rather gloriously rude, Trygaeus’ flight introduces the parody of Euripides’ play *Bellerophon*. *Bellerophon* was performed in around 430 B.C., and told the story of the hero Bellerophon’s attempt to fly up to Olympus on his winged horse Pegasus. The play seems to have followed a fairly standard version of this myth, in which Zeus punishes the hero for his hubristic attempts to reach the gods by sending a gadfly to bite Pegasus; startled, the horse throws his rider to his death. Aristophanes’ *Peace* alludes to Euripides’ play several times: Trygaeus addresses the beetle as ‘my dear little Pegasus’ (line 76), and his daughter warns him not to fall off mid-flight lest he become a Euripidean tragedy (146–8). Several near-quotations from the *Bellerophon* are also spoken by Trygaeus mid-flight (154–5). Even for those members of the audience familiar only with the basic story of *Bellerophon*, the joke is fairly clear: tragedy’s graceful flying horse has become comedy’s dung beetle.

Although Euripides’ play does not, unfortunately, survive in full, there are some substantial fragments preserved, mostly through quotations in other authors (for example, the fifth-century A.D. author Stobaeus, whose compilation of quotations from the major authors of antiquity is a particularly rich source). The play appears to have been unusually bleak, even for a tragedy. *Bellerophon* seems to have opened with the hero wandering alone in the wilderness (in line with the *Bellerophon* story told in *Iliad* 6.152–211). The hero rails at the gods, even going so far as to deny their existence (fr. 286); and a monologue likely spoken by Bellerophon in the first scene laments the state of mankind, saying ‘it’s best for

a man never to have been born’ (fr. 285), since rich and poor are alike in their misery. From the total nihilism of the opening, to the hero’s final plunge to earth, this is not a play with many laughs.

In parodying the *Bellerophon*, Aristophanes’ *Peace* turns this model of tragic failure and despair into a play of success and celebration. Trygaeus of course outperforms his tragic counterpart: unlike Bellerophon, he does not fall to his death, but succeeds in ascending to Olympus, where he successfully confronts the gods (though, as Hermes explains in lines 195–226, the Olympians have recently moved house, leaving only minor divine opponents to face our comic hero, who, like Bellerophon, initially had only Zeus in his sights!). If, as Trygaeus’ daughter tells us in lines 146–8, the mark of a Euripidean tragic hero is to fail in his efforts and end up crippled or dead in the process, it is the mark of a comic hero to succeed in his every outlandish endeavour, whether founding a city in the sky (as in *Birds*), installing a sausage-seller as the next leader of Athens (as in *Knights*), or flying up to heaven on a giant beetle hand-reared on dung-balls.

## *Peace* and plenty

But it is not only in its transformation of tragic failure into comic success that *Peace* outdoes Euripides’ *Bellerophon*; and it is this that brings us to the play’s second half. After his return from heaven, Trygaeus’ success ushers in a state of affairs which seems the opposite of the *Bellerophon*’s exaggerated, nihilistic tragic-ness. Where Euripides’ hero insists that ‘it is better never to experience good things’ (fr. 286.18), since it only makes inevitable suffering feel worse in comparison, the *Peace* celebrates the advent of the ‘good things’, ἀγαθὰ (*agatha*) in Greek, which are enjoyed by the hero and his community as a result of the peace. Throughout the play, Trygaeus and the chorus declare the arrival and enjoyment of *agatha*. They pray for *agatha* before they rescue the goddess Peace (453); the community is offered a share in the benefits of *agatha* (888); the chorus praise god for changing things in favour of *agatha*

(945–6); other characters praise Trygaeus for bringing the *agatha* of peace (1198–9); the play ends with a final celebration of *agatha* as Trygaeus prays that the community may get back the good things they had previously lost (1326–7); and the play closes with a final hymn to the *agatha* now enjoyed by the hero (1334–5).

The *Peace*'s celebration of the good life is not confined to the hero, but is also the theme of the chorus, who state that Trygaeus' actions are good not only for him, but for everyone (911). The chorus offer an extended hymn to the pleasures of the countryside and of rural life (1127–71). Attica is described as verdant and flourishing; rain falls gently on the recently sown fields (1140–1); grapes and wild figs ripen on the vine (1161–5); the farmers enjoy all the abundant offerings of the countryside: roast chickpeas, beans, thrushes and finches, milk, hare, myrtle-berries, and thyme; and they grow fat on the offerings of the summer (1170–1).

### Outside the city: paradise or wilderness?

The description in the *Peace* of the landscape outside of the city as a place of joyful abundance stands in stark contrast to the non-urban space hinted at in the Bellerophon myth. In the *Iliad* Bellerophon is described wandering in a wilderness called the Aleian plain, shunning the path of other men, and this episode appears to directly precede the flight to heaven which is the climax of Euripides' play. Unless Euripides departed significantly from the established myth (which most scholars consider unlikely), his *Bellerophon* must also have depicted the hero in the Aleian plain before his fall from Pegasus. The depiction of the space outside the city as wild and hostile is a common theme in tragedy (e.g. (pseudo-)Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and *Ajax*, and Euripides' *Trojan Women* and *Bacchae*), and so it seems likely, especially given the rather bleak tone of the fragments, that Euripides' *Bellerophon* also depicted the Aleian plain as a stark and inhospitable place where the hero wandered alone, far from the civilized world. If so, *Peace*'s depiction of non-urban space as idyllic, verdant, and a refuge from the troubles of the city is potentially another way in which the play sets up a contrast between the ethos of tragedy, characterized by failure, and that of comedy, characterized by success and celebration. Not only the heroes Bellerophon and Trygaeus, one a success and the other a failure, one who spurns life's pleasures and the other who celebrates the advent of *agatha*; but even the landscape in which their stories are enacted, one bleak and the other joyful,

one empty and the other bursting with life, become part of the distinction between the tragic and comic worlds.

And so, with the Peace of Nicias in 421 promising an end to the war and the beginning of a better life, the *Peace* of Aristophanes stakes its claim as a fitting kind of play for this brave new world. Comedy, not tragedy, is the genre of the here and now, and the *Peace*'s willingness in its second half to just sit back and enjoy its hero's successes proves it. By choosing to parody a tragedy whose hero is so strikingly bleak in his outlook, the *Peace*'s transformation of Euripides' *Bellerophon* into a comic story of optimism and celebration becomes not only a transformation of tragic narrative, but also a refutation of the tragic ethos. As emphatically as Trygaeus' model, Bellerophon, rejected life's pleasures, Trygaeus and the *Peace* celebrate them. In the immediate aftermath of the peace in 421, *Peace* therefore presents comedy as a fitting genre in which to celebrate the 'good things' which must now come to Athens, as surely as they come to Trygaeus.

*Naomi Scott works on Athenian comedy in the Department of Classics and Archaeology at the University of Nottingham.*